



“It is up to nature to restore the ecological integrity of the system. The measure of how well we do our work will come from monitoring nature mending herself.”

— HENRY DEAN
SFWMDC EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

continued from front

Management District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – are embarked on the largest environmental restoration project ever.

“The Kissimmee River Restoration established the relationships and ground rules that are now central to the implementation of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan,” said District Governing Board Member Patrick Gleason. “The success we see in the Kissimmee River bodes well for the future of CERP.”

WHY THE RIVER WAS CHANGED

More than 50 years ago, severe storms left communities in the upper Kissimmee River valley under lingering floodwaters. The result: a cry for flood control heard in the halls of government in Tallahassee and Washington, and a partnership for a massive channelization project. By the early 1970s, the 102-mile meandering Kissimmee River was transformed into a 56-mile canal, 300 feet wide and 30 feet deep.

The channelization of the Kissimmee River accomplished its goal of flood control; the river – with a new designation as the C-38 Canal – was capable of moving huge amounts of water and ensuring a level of flood protection as far north as downtown Orlando.

FLOOD CONTROL DAMAGES WILDLIFE HABITAT

Yet, even before the project was complete, anglers and birdwatchers began to witness other dramatic changes. More than 90 percent of the waterfowl population disappeared, bald eagle nests declined by more than 70 percent and the once-renowned bass fishery was gone.

When the steam shovels carved the C-38, the floodplain ecosystem that once was as much as three miles wide and rich in wetland habitat was radically changed. The intentional effort to provide flood control unintentionally caused habitat destruction on a massive scale.

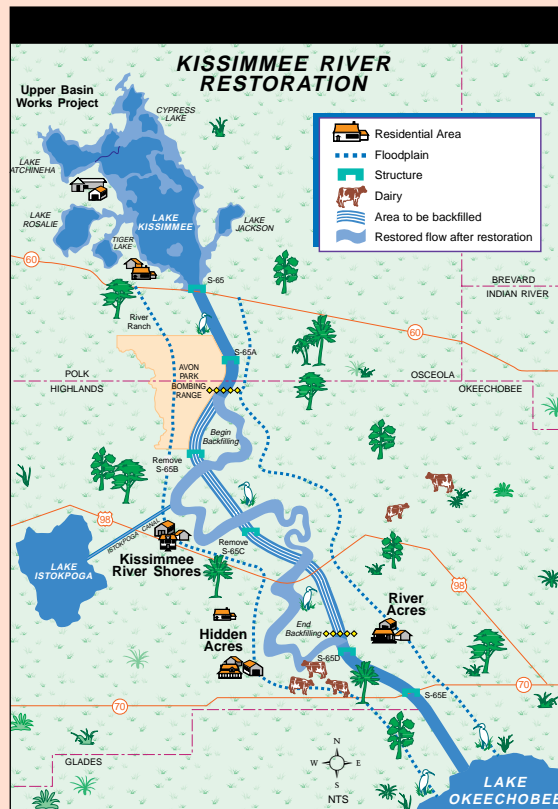
Talk began of restoration almost as soon as the channelization project was complete. Ultimately, the

District and its partners at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers developed a \$578 million plan to fill in 22 continuous miles of the C-38 and restore flow to more than 40 miles of the meandering Kissimmee River. The backfilling will help restore about 40 square miles of river floodplain ecosystem.

On June 10, 1999, heavy equipment returned to the Kissimmee River valley to begin Phase I backfilling of the C-38. Phase I construction was completed in February 2001, and with the June onset of the 2001 rainy season, Mother Nature’s work began.



The channelized river (foreground, bottom third of the picture) – when refilled with dirt – becomes what it once was, with snaking curves of meandering waterways surrounded by flooded plains.



Preserving Kissimmee Area Neighborhoods A Promise Kept

In 1992, residents of Kissimmee River Shores, Hidden Acres and River Acres were assured that they would not be flooded or forced to sell their homes because of the Kissimmee River Restoration project. District and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) staff began working with residents to find ways to maintain flood protection levels in these communities. Important steps toward this end included:

- A series of public workshops in each community were held to discuss and develop proposed alternatives that would meet both restoration and residential needs.

- Each community was presented three categories of preliminary alternatives: infrastructure modifications, elevation of property above flood levels and/or purchase.

- Each community worked together with District and Corps staff to arrive at independent solutions that maintain the character of the community while meeting restoration goals. All of the chosen alternatives are more cost-effective than outright purchase of all of the homes/land within the impacted areas.

THE RESULTS

- **Kissimmee River Shores’** residents chose either to willingly sell their homes and move away, or to have their homes elevated. Land acquisition and construction in this neighborhood has already begun.

- **River Acres’** residents suggested an infrastructure modification that was not part of the original alternatives presented by the District or Corps. Based on residential input, an existing canal will be extended to provide flood protection from a lower pool of the river. Construction in this neighborhood is set to begin in late 2003.

- **Hidden Acres’** residents chose an alternative that includes purchase within the five-year floodplain and property elevation within the 100-year floodplain. This greatly minimized the impacts to this community. Construction is set to begin in spring 2003.

FUTURE PLANS

The next phase of construction is slated to begin in about three years. Before the heavy equipment can return, more than a dozen projects – such as modifying U.S. Highway 98, creating a new CSX Railroad bridge, and floodproofing of canal-side communities – must be complete.

Simultaneously, the District is working to buy the land needed to implement the headwaters revitalization program, which will allow lakes Cypress, Hatchineha and Kissimmee to hold more water and provide more natural flows to the river. The ecology of a river relies on flow. In the case of the Kissimmee River, the more closely the historic flow can be recreated, the more confident we can be that nature will achieve

the ultimate restoration goal.

“We are just beginning the years-long effort of restoring the integrity of the Kissimmee River ecosystem,” Thornton said. “Yet, when I travel the meandering Kissimmee River and witness the changes firsthand, it tells me that large-scale environmental restoration can be successful, and that we – along with our partners at the Corps – are headed in the right direction.”